

February & March 2018 THUNGMO TALES

WESTERN ARUNACHAL LANDSCAPE PROGRAM

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Where nature, culture and tradition converge: Rhododendron Festival, 2018 in Shergaon

-Rajarshi chakroborty



For three days in the end of February, 2018, the serene valley of Shergaon came alive to celebrate the area's incredible biodiversity, rich culture and tradition and the unique identity of the Sherdukpens. The Rhododendron Festival was aimed to celebrate the Buddhist New Year festival of Losar, with the theme of nature conservation. A lot of cultural performers came from places as far as West Bengal, Assam, Bhutan and other parts of Western Arunachal to take part in the traditional songs and dances which enthralled the audience fully. We from WWF-WAL, with our long association with the people of Shergaon, were there with government departments like the Shergaon Forest Division, Arunachal Pradesh State Biodiversity Board (APSBB), to celebrate the region's biodi-

versity and to highlight the conservation needs with thematic displays with posters and banners. Our posters were designed on biodiversity components of the area, including Rhododendrons, birds, mammals. Along with the posters, we had designed and distributed around 150 t-shirts and

caps with theme of the festival which were used by the participants and the volunteers.

A lot of important dignitaries including the State Education Minister and the local MLA, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh presided over the events of different days and also took part in the daily seminars on various conservation-related aspects, which had participants from the State Medicinal Plant Board, Forest Department, and Research Scholars. In one of the seminar days, I gave a presentation on the importance and conservation requirements of the red panda, which was enthusiastically received. Our efforts and participation was much appreciated by the organizers. The event unfailingly highlighted the close bond between Sherdukpens and forests in the region.





Some of the villagers in Thembang CCA raised the issue of declining water sources in a village-level meeting more than a couple of years ago. I find this quite surprising, considering the area receives heavy rainfall, and yet there are water scarcity issues in some of parts of Arunachal Pradesh. However further discussions with other villages revealed the alarming rate at which water sources of a majority of villages are no longer reliable. And yet there is scanty research on this issue that is rampant in the state. I recall the recurring incidents of drinking water crisis in Tawang town during the lean season, every year, especially during the winter. And as a result, the district administration has been using water supply vehicles to transport water

to the door steps of the residents in the town. Though this is not an acute problem at this juncture, the water usage and its sources need proper management attention to ensure water security. With the aim of inventorying springs of the settlements in the conservation areas in western Arunachal Pradesh and at least to establish an example of a better

spring-shed management practice in the state, we recently have undertaken a spring inventory training in Thembang village in collaboration with People's Science Institute, Dehradun. It includes different parameters to measure mountain slopes, basics of geology and its functions, introduction to spring and how to check water qualities. Around 6 youths from different parts of the conservation areas were trained on these parameters. In coming months, we are planning to make an inventory of springs, their water quality, discharge measures and usage data will be collected to develop a plan for spring-shed management plan in the CCAs.

Photo 1,2 and 3 : Youth from tawang and west kameng districts undergoing training on spring shed management at Thembang bapu CCA

Photo 4: Locals carrying truck full of cans of water to take back to their villages, owing to acute water shortage.

Expanding our Horizon - Re-discovering a forgotten sanctuary

-Janaki M

In lines with expanding our efforts from western Arunachal to other parts of the state, we had a recent engagement with the DFO of the Along forest division in the West Siang district. From the discussion, it has emerged for the need to conduct a biodiversity survey within the Yorde Rabe Supse Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) which remains unexplored

since the formation of the sanctuary in 2007. The WLS is a potential habitat for a variety of animals, especially Tigers, considering its wide altitudinal range of 800 - 4000m. Further engagement with the Panchayat member of the Galong (popularly known as Galo) tribe that resides near the sanctuary elicited a very motivated response from the communi-

ty. The community anticipates its participation in the conservation and development of the sanctuary. The Sanctuary seems like a promising place to venture our extended efforts and a biodiversity survey is set to start by the end of this year.



Looking ahead – The way forward

-Jaya Upadhyay

A series of meetings were planned and conducted with the District Administration and at the Brigade Office of Indian Army to update of the ongoing work and discuss collaboration of activities related to conservation of Nagula Wetland Complex, Human-wildlife Conflict mitigation and liaising with district schemes for conservation orientation works.

A meeting to organize the "Patrolling

and Monitoring" activity in each CCA in Zemithang was held to document the biodiversity and to keep a check on the sustainable collection of non-timber forest products in the forest areas. The meeting was also had the DFO (Divisional forest officer) and SP on board, for more inputs

Initial meeting and awareness programmes were conducted in Mukto

and Shakti village with the aim of covering the forest of these villages in the CCA regime. The shown great interest in supporting the cause of conservation.

Photo: Meeting with the village leaders in Zemithang to organize the "Patrolling and monitoring" activity, participated by the DFO and SP.

Palm Oil Cultivation in Arunachal Pradesh: A preliminary survey

-Tugo Riba

Palm Oil Plantation was launched in Arunachal Pradesh in the year of 2016 under Mini Mission-II of National Mission on Oilseeds and Oil Palm. The Dept. Of Agriculture has set a target of 1.2 lakh ha of barren/ uncultivated land to be brought under palm oil cultivation. With the objective of gaining a first-hand knowledge on Palm Oil Cultivation Project, the WWF Sustainable Business Team along with the landscape programmes visited most of the potential palm oil cultivation sites in the state and interacted with Mr. Idar Nyori (ADO and Nodal officer for palm oil promotion

in the state), Directorate of Agriculture, GoAP.

Upon conducting this preliminary survey the team felt that more works is required in matters of collecting land use pattern with the help of Remote Sensing and extensive on-ground survey. Also, the term "barren land/uncultivated land" used by the concerned authorities seems a misnomer from ecological/wildlife point of view. May be due to its infancy stage, the pace of cultivation is not in consonance with the target. In the next two months, the WWF will undertake an in-depth study in order to iden-

tify the nature and scope of this Project and provide suggestions (if any) to the Govt and other stakeholders for the cause of sustainability. Further investigations are expected to throw more light on this matter.

Side note: Tugo Riba, who is from Pasighat of the East Siang district, is our newest intern we have on-board with us, to conduct the preliminary survey on the Palm oil plantation in Arunachal Pradesh.



Publications

A book on the 'Minor Forest Products of Mandala Phudung Khellong CCA' was published and distributed to the key leaders of the CCA, such as the ASM, GBs and local guide by Manisha Kumari.



Celebration of Big Bird Day, 2018

-Rajarshi Chakroborty

We at WWF-WAL have tried to observe Big Bird Day along with the rest of the country regularly and have included observations from WAL into the pan-India list of bird species recorded during the occasion. This year, the event was celebrated with much enthusiasm in the periphery of Eagle Nest Wildlife Sanctuary, in the newly formed Sing-

chungBugun Community Reserve in West Kameng district, with much initiative and enthusiasm from MilloTasser, DFO, Shergaon Forest Division. The event was celebrated through day-long bird watching in and around Singchung, involving the local youth members of the patrolling squad of the community reserve and the local women's self-help group. A total

of 38 species were observed throughout the day and the list was duly uploaded in Ebird.org (<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42922968>) that day, in compliance with the rules of the event. The exercise helped us witness the amazing avifauna of the community reserve which in future can be a major attraction for tourists.

Forest policy draft embraces community forests in North-East India

- Kamal Medhi

The draft National Forest Policy 2018 recognizes most of the forests (about 85-90%) in the north-eastern region as community-owned. These forests are crucial wildlife habitat and it supports lives of many indigenous communities.

One of the crucial management recommendations suggested in the policy is to treat these forests as mosaic of 'community forest management landscapes' and ensure the defined boundaries of these on digital platform. It also recommends that the state forest department shall take up the capacity building of forest management by democratic institutions such as autonomous district councils and other authorities of north east through community ownership and participation for forest protection and

conservation.

The overall goal of the policy is to safeguard the ecological and livelihood security of people. It aims to have at least one-third of the total land area under forest and tree cover. In hills and mountains, this even aims to maintain two-third of total land area under forest and tree cover in order to prevent soil erosions, land degradation and also to ensure the stability of the fragile ecosystems. The state of Arunachal Pradesh has more than 80% of forests and tree cover and around 60% forest classified as unclassed state forest and it is de-facto controlled by the local communities. The draft policy endows opportunity to engage with local authorities and community-base organization for securing

major chunk of remaining forests of the state. The community-based conservation models could play a vital role under this policy draft. It is even more pertinent provided there is a continued forest loss as reported in last two forest survey reports by the Forest Survey of India.

The draft policy suggests for a board of forestry for national level and state board of forestry at state level to function as legal and institutional mechanism to ensure implementation of these policy actions at national and state levels. It also suggests formation of national mission for community forest management in the country.

Inspirations from the field

**One fine day, I saw a God of wings sway.
Oh! What a sight to behold
A convocation so bold.
Off they danced in the limitless sky
And I wished I could fly.
For they were blessed to travel with the wind,
Under the watchful spirit of the mountains.
For they were holy to make a home in the trees,
Under the fiery cosmic of universe.
Inking that flight in my memories;
Not all that I can do,
I will continue to endeavor.
Because my children have yet to see,
The Winged God.**

** Dedicated to the eagles of Phudung*

Side note: This poem was written by Manisha Kumari, who is a newly joined young member of WWF-WAL. The inspiration to pen down this poem came from the significant time she has spent at Mandala –Phudung working on the sustainability of the NTFP collection with the local community.



Encounter or Ambush?

-Rimung

This time our survey in West Kameng was extended to Tale Valley wildlife sanctuary in the Ziro Plateau. This was a much anticipated experience as we have wanted to survey this area since the year 2017. There has been no recorded presence of red panda in Tale WLS, however interestingly; there has been a reported sighting, almost 9 years back. To further investigate into this reported sighting, we met the range officer who narrated the incident of when a forest officer and guard accidentally encountered a red creature scurry away into the forest. Babul da, the forest guide was assured that he had seen a red panda after he coincidentally saw two more Red pandas at the same spot, two days later. While hearing this narration from the Range officer, both mine and my partner's jaw dropped and we couldn't wait to meet this lucky forest guard. So the very next day we were headed to the base camp and as soon as we reached, Babul da lead us to the spot where he had seen the red panda, so long ago. Demarcating the sanctuary and the community forest, flows a beautiful and clear stream and we went down this stream into the forest. When we reached the spot, he recited the whole story again. When I rechecked with him if this is exactly where he saw the two red pandas as well, to my dismay, he recollected that they weren't red pandas. However he went on to explain that this creature he had sighted

was all white with owl-like eyes and moved really slow. From his description, it sounded like a slow loris.

Besides the disappointment of not finding any evidence of red panda presence in Tale WLS, we managed our own adventures, of which the most thrilling was this one time when we were returning back from the field, while we were lead by Pange the dog. All through the way back, Pange walked right in front, like she was the queen of the forest and it was a sight to watch. However she suddenly stopped and her body language had entirely changed. She started pacing from side to side and started barking like never before. A loud growl came from our left side and the growl got louder and started coming from the other side. The growl then changed to this eerie call, which seeded a fear I've never felt before. And Babul da was ex-

side, was not happy with our presence and it felt like it was just 10-15 metres away. Babul da asked us to walk as fast as we could, while he made loud noises to scare the animal away, or the very least keep her away. We hurried back, feeling like we had trespassed the Bear's territory. On reaching back to the base camp, almost nostalgically recollected what we had felt at that very moment. Babul da said it was possibly a mother bear with her cubs, and hence she was so defensive and he at that moment had just one thing on his mind, as to how he would protect us from the bear, with not even a knife at hand. He chuckled as he reflected that Pange would have become all pale in fear because after that encounter, she didn't dare to walk in front. That eerie noise I heard continues to ring in my ear, making me realize that an animal encounter on field is an entirely different experience from being ambushed by one.

Side note: Rimung, who hails from Itanagar, is an intern who has been involved in Red panda survey across the state for more than 6 months.

Photo: (Top) My partner and I, with Queen Pange. (Bottom) The beautiful and transparent stream that separated the Wildlife sanctuary and the community forest and community forest.



plaining that this was a bear call, the eerie call got closer and louder. I shuddered because whatever was on that



One step towards a thousand mile journey – The “Wildlife camera man” from Zemithang valley

-Jaya Upadhayay

Standing in this open field is the noted “Wildlife camera man” of the zemithang valley, Pemba Romo from the socksten village. Pemba is reminiscence by the locals as a young boy who is often seen carrying his camera along with him. Pemba was just another youth who struggled to find a job after completing his high school until he grabbed the opportunity to participate in one of the patrolling and monitoring activity in the forested areas that was organized by the villagers in support of WWF- India. This opportunity helped him have a closer association with nature and so he realized where his true passion lied – Wildlife photography/videography. These photos of a blue whistling thrush, a crimson-breasted woodpecker and yellow-throated marten, are only few among many beautiful photos that Pemba has captured and these continue to serve as inspiration to many more youths in the Zemithang valley to tirelessly pursue their passion and even contribute their fair share in the conservation of the Zemithang valley. This is most definitely one of the many significant steps in our long journey towards community-based conservation.



The OKSRT route (Orang-Kalaktang-Shergaon-Rupa-Tenga), Arunachal Pradesh

-Rajarshi chakarborty

Like in other parts of the Himalayas, winter makes the mountains of western Arunachal Pradesh wear a special garb. The ridges and valleys explode in a riot of fall colours, in various shades of rufous, brown, chestnut and greys, contrasted by the azure cloudless sky. Buddhist tribes across the state in living in isolated mountain villages breathe easy after the conclusion of the harvest season and look forward to a time of colourful festivities, topped by Losar, or the Tibetan New Year celebrations, usually taking place in February-March. Winter also heightens the birding opportunities in certain pockets of Western Arunachal, a region

already counted among the Global Biodiversity Hotspots and home to numerous IBAs or Important Bird Areas. While the diversity in elevation, vegetation types and other factors signify distinct bird communities in various habitats, few routes are as enriching and fulfilling to experience the spectacular overall birdlife of the region as the OKSRT route. I have already documented more than a hundred species in the stretch, but the total count has the potential to increase manifold.

OKSRT, acronym for the Orang-Kalaktang-Shergaon-Rupa-Tenga route, is a 158 km long road in West Kameng district of Western Arunachal, providing a vital alternative road link to the older and more traditional Bhalukpong-Bomdila route and linking the mountains with the plains of Assam. Constructed and maintained by the BRO (Border Roads Organization), the road was formally

inaugurated as an alternative to the Bhalukpong road in 2016 and especially in winter, presents a much better driving experience with its wide blacktops, less traffic and strong bridges.

The road formally begins from the bustling township of Orang, under Udalguri district and situated 117 kms away from Guwahati, the capital. The area is dominated by the colourful Bodo tribe and as the road crosses Orang and later on passes through the Mazbat tea gardens, lucky encounters with one of their weekly haats are possible, where a riot of colours, smells and noises greets the visitors in form of the makeshift stalls selling everything from utensils to local rice liquor. From Shikaridanga, the settlements become scarce and the road passes through wide dry riverbeds and stony fields. The electric wires on both sides are a good option to keep a lookout for species like the Indian silverbills, often seen huddled together in a bunch, black shouldered kite and the ubiquitous Indian roller..

Shortly afterwards, the road enters into Arunachal Pradesh through hills clothed with dense tropical forests and starts climbing up via serpentine bends, of which there are popularly said to be a thousand (This stretch is thus termed "hazaargolai") in the whole route. On a clear day, the plains of Assam with distant rivers are spread out

in the distance throughout much of the climb. Here, in the initial stages, species common to the foothills abound, including the crimson sunbird, ashy bulbul, crested serpent eagle and the elusive maroon oriole. After the SSB (Sashastra Seema Bal) check post near the township of Balem (there are three such checkposts till the town of Sheragaon, where the visitor may be asked to produce proof of Identification and the inner line permit), the road passes through even sharper hair pin bends and climbs steeply through deeply forested gorges and stream valleys. This stretch is one of the richest in terms of avifauna in the entire route, springing surprises such three lesser seen species of yuhinas (white-naped yuhina, black chinned yuhina, white



Weekly haat near Shikaridanga



Great hornbill

OKSRT, acronym for the Orang-Kalaktang-Shergaon-Rupa-Tenga route, is a 158 km long road in West Kameng district of Western Arunachal, providing a vital alternative road link to the older and more traditional Bhalukpong-Bomdila route and linking the mountains with the plains of Assam. Constructed and maintained by the BRO (Border Roads Organization), the road was formally

bellied erpornis), Asian emerald cuckoo (although a summer visitor), long tailed sibia & the rare Jerdon's baza. On one late afternoon in autumn, I came across a great hornbill sitting motionless on a tree branch 10 meters from the road in the fading golden light, providing a perfect photo-op. There are numerous streams and nullahs which crisscross the road at regular intervals, providing ideal habitats for forktails, of which both slaty-backed and spotted varieties have been seen in this stretch. In winter, the mammoth leafless silk-cotton trees near the roadside start flashing their flame like flowers, proving to be magnets for species like the orange-bellied leafbird, golden-throated barbet and the spot-winged starling. By the time the road crosses the second SSB checkpost, it has gained much elevation (Above 1500 meters) and passes through sub-topical forested tracts along the ridge. The scenery also changes, presenting a spectacular panorama of lofty mountains dotted with remote hamlets inhabited by the Monpa tribe and the silvery river sneaking through deep gorges down far below. Winter brings out the black bulbul in huge numbers in noisy chirping flocks encountered almost everywhere in the route. Species like the black throated tits and ashy throated warblers are also commonly encountered in village groves and gardens. The deep valleys and ridges create thermals which are used by black eagles, oriental honey buzzards & even peregrine falcons to soar effortlessly. In winter, the otherwise scarce common kestrel becomes a commoner and can be seen hovering in its characteristic style on multiple occasions.



OKSRT near Shikaridanga, about to enter Arunachal

After by-passing the large town ship of Kalaktang, the road climbs into lower temperate forests with oaks, chestnut and maples, displaying the pastel shades of winter. Here, raptors like the mountain hawk-eagle and the Eurasian sparrow hawk have been seen keeping a careful eye for prey. The black-throated thrush, a winter migrant, is found in large flocks in the temperate forests. Even resident species like the blue-fronted redstart and the Himalayan blue tail become more conspicuous during winter, accompanied by rufous breasted accentors, having come down in their altitudinal migration.

The road finally snakes into the "S" part of OKSRT, the large village of Shergaon, a stronghold of the unique and vibrant Shertukpen tribe, who profess an ancestry from a union between a Tibetan prince and an Ahom princess. Shergaon and other Shertukpen villages like Jigaon hold immense tourism potential with their rich biodiversity, quaint village life and colourful festivals and rituals. The village is situated in a broad river valley where birding can be rewarding all year round. Redstarts like plumbeous, white-capped & the winter-visiting Hodgson's are common residents of the riverbed, accompanied an occasional brown dipper. The forest around the river provides look-out posts for another winter visitor, the sleek Himalayan buzzard. In winter of 2016, even a pair of mal-

lards made a surprise visit to the riverbed, in a patch near the main settlement itself. The Shergaon-Doimara road, another road project planned to link Shergaon with the Assam plains, branches off the OKSRT just beyond the township and is another excellent birding location, also becoming a hotspot for Asiatic black bears during the winter months, who descend on the valley to feast on the oak tree fruiting. On my last visit to this stretch in December, as a pale hazy dusk was settling on the oak and maple leaf strewn road, a mixed flock of 50-60 little buntings, black throated thrushes and black bulbuls perched on a nearby tree like a cloud and melted away equally quickly.

Beyond Shergaon, the OKSRT passes along the river till it reaches Rupa, one of the main towns in the area and then joins NH 229 (Bhalukpong-Tawang road), thereby concluding its long journey. In February-March, this stretch is set ablaze by the roadside rhododendron trees (most commonly Rhododendron arboreum) with their blood-red flowers. Species like rufous vented yuhina, blue rock thrush, and ashy drongo are frequently encountered in this area.

Due to the less amount of vehicular traffic compared to the Bhalukpong-tawang route, birdlife along the majority of the OKSRT is still not very shy and provides ample opportunities for photography. The same can only be hoped for the future as it is being developed as a main entry-axis from Assam to western Arunachal, especially for tourists travelling directly from Guwahati. For now, the mysterious OKSRT provides a rare glimpse of the spectacular birdlife, landscapes and people of this remote corner of north-east India. Side note: This article was recently published in the Saevus Blog

<http://www.saevus.in/a-journey-through-birders-paradise/>

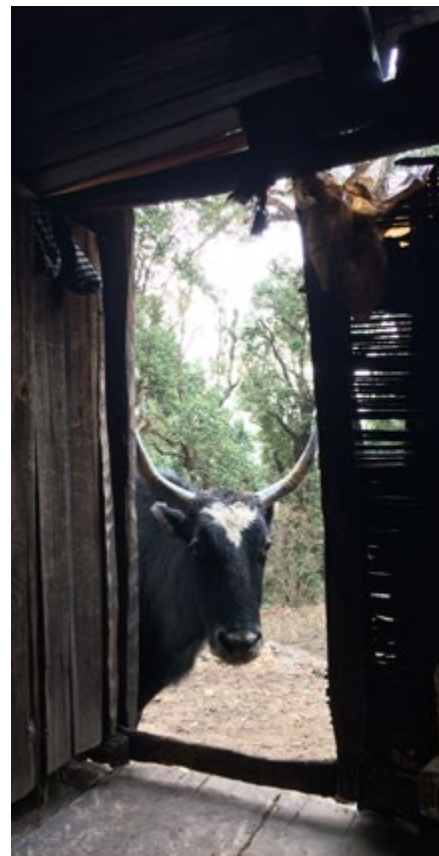
Mandala Phudung, West Kameng district

-Manisha Kumari

Almost an hour and half from the Dirang town is Mandala-Phudung, which is inhabited by the Monpas. Why Mandala Phudung? Well unlike the other Tibetan Buddhist Monpas, the Monpas of Mandala-Phudung practice a different set of cultural beliefs, family values and eating habits, which happen to be very similar to the Sherdukpen tribe, which is an ethnic group related to the Tribe Aka and Monpas. The Mandala-Phudung community has also recently inaugurated a "Gompa" which is a place of worship of the Tibetan-Buddhist community, similar



to temples, church and mosque. The Gompa is easily accessed from the Mandala Birding lodge and leads to the main settlement of the village. This region also has high potential birding spots. With the construction of the gompa, many international and political leaders are keen on investing in similar developments in the near future to bring more tourism opportunity to the village.





Paya, West siang district

-Janaki M

From our recent visit to Aalo (formerly Along), we stumbled upon a tiny hamlet called Paya which is a half an hour drive from the Aalo town. This hamlet can be accessed by a hanging bridge built by the villagers themselves. The Galong(or Galo) tribe is known for their modeled house which are built skillfully to withstand earthquakes and even floods to an extent. A visit to Paya will exhibit these building skills and there are also potential birding



The tiny hamlet named Paya

spots by the river. The community at Paya hopes to promote the hanging bridge and these potential birding spots as a form of ecotourism. Our short visit to Paya has made it evident that this will be place to look out in the near future.



The hangin bridge that leads to Paya



Current status of CCA

Sr.	Name of the CCA	AREA (Sq. km)
A.	Thembang Bapu CCA	635
B.	Pangchen Lumpo Muchat CCA	98
C.	Pangchen Lakhar CCA	85
D.	Pangchen Socktsen Diksum CCA	40
E.	Senge Dzong CCA	107
F.	Nyukmadung CCA	189
G.	Mandala-Phudung Khellong CCA	114